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# WHAT IS BACKGROUND?

BY MURIEL HARRIS

THE fairy-tale of Paris belongs to all of us, in whatever terms it may be told. For some it is Marie Antoinette and the Petit Trianon; and, curiously, by comparison with a rather worthless Queen, the Great War pales. For some it is Napoleon in his cocked hat and white breeches, and his great tomb, one of the fingertips of Paris. For still more it is the Bois and the elegance and luxury and beautiful women; and for the rest, there is always the particular application—the house where Balzac had his printing-press, or perhaps only a great stone wall, symbol of the centuries, over which a fruit-tree blooms, symbol of centuries continually renewed. I cannot think of anyone for whom there is not in Paris some answering chord, some link with a great aggregate of humanity, which has lived and wrought and piled up history and romance and experience for two thousand years, all under the one banner of Paris.

Nor is it again necessarily an individual circumstance, or a person, which causes a thrilling as it brings the mind in contact with that great accumulation. I like to think that Julian on his island in the Seine took pleasure in watching the waters flow by, even as to-day I note that they are higher or lower, or that one of the indefatigable fishermen has really caught a gudgeon. It is pleasant to contemplate King Louis's Sainte Chapelle and to think upon his piety, wondering how it really struck his people, whether they liked his saintliness or often found it boring, whether he sometimes lost his temper, or appreciated Parisian cooking; to try to disengage the man who built the chapel from all the hearsay and convention which have made of him but one more stone figure upon a tomb. At least he liked his island in the Seine, just as Julian liked it, just indeed as you and I like it to-day. Perhaps too his court caught gudgeons and hoped the heavy rains would not bring a flood. It is moving to see the stones in an

ancient church, some of which go back to the time of Christ, relics of the Roman day; it is very nearly amusing to see the Panthéon, with all its modernness and the Gallic spirit, which buries its great men there, and then with a change of opinion, takes them out again; it is stirring to remember that it stands upon the hill of Saint Geneviève who saved Paris, and to think that there were then, even as now, rebels against the old autocrat, however saintly, rebels indeed for whom Paris has always been famous. All these things may or may not strike the spark which brings the past once more to life. But they form a background for their descendants, against which they in turn achieve significance. They are something which belongs to the Old World and to Paris in particular. For Paris has always been modern, whether in the innovation of her Sainte Chapelle or of her Panthéon. To-day and yesterday, the latest comers have an inheritance of astonishing unity.

It is perhaps necessary to have lived in the New World to realize the significance of background such as Paris. The New World is like a clean, white linen sheet, full of utility, good to touch, pleasantly suggestive perhaps of wind and water and green grass. Paris is like a piece of old lace, mellow, exquisite, the outcome of centuries of human effort, all of which whisper their story to those who can hear and give an impetus towards the next. There is hardly a street in Paris which has not a story. And it need not be the story of a Queen who went into a convent here; a King who was murdered there. It need not even be the French Revolution with all its inclusion of the people proper. But there you have a stone stair-case, the steps of which are worn with myriad feet, old and young, sorrowful and joyous. That red tiled floor has been waxed for a century and more. Generations of locksmiths have worked without intermission in the little shop below, while the street echoes and reëchoes with the secular cries and Pan-pipes of the china-menders, the rag-and-bone men, the fruit-sellers, what not. At the café at the corner perhaps the Encyclopædists met and talked; still more significant, the green-grocer and the baker and the oil-merchant thrash out questions of the day, now as then, while their wives, Buddha-like, sit behind the counter in the shop; never moving, it would almost

seem, even to go to bed. It has all been done and done again and is still being done, and in the curiosity-shop—and curiosity-shops abound—there is in the bits of lace or china, in the quaint prints selling for a song, in scraps of chintz or brocade, an epitome of Parisian life, as with outward changes it has pursued its changeless way. To the outsider it is at least picturesque; some of it he has seen in books, perhaps on the stage. Here it is actually real, normal, natural, no effort towards “atmosphere”, towards effect of any kind, an amazing background, against which real people live and move and have their being.

And what is background? What is the difference between the virgin forest, perhaps as old as Paris after all, and the hill upon which St. Denis’s head was cut off, the Paris indeed which is most thrilling by reason of its deeds of violence? What is the difference between the inspiration of an uncharted country and the stones which have been trodden by a race? It is the difference of a great limitation. Background is a frame, a container, a vehicle. It enables men not only to see, but to see something. It is the motor of thought, which, even when the thinker ceases his small effort towards understanding, still carries him along and saves him the effort each time of going back to the beginning. It is not for nothing that the human being is gregarious. The creative effort which is in everyone is always seeking means to express itself. Background provides a common formula, for it also is composed of human beings and it is to human beings that a man tells his story, seeks to gain their sympathy and understanding, to empty himself, as it were, of the thought that is bursting in his mind and so to obtain relief. Possibly the greatest gift of background is its provision of a common language, and just as some languages are halting, limited, so others, such as that of Paris, have a wealth of words that almost outrun their original function. The whispering forest is articulate only to the few, and the man who would express himself in its language has with hard labor to hew out the means by which he can translate it to the many. The common language of Paris is shared in more or less degree by all. The slightest allusion calls up a picture in the mind of the listener, and the speaker is freed from the bondage of means, from the material side of thought, by all this wealth of background.

Background is often called history; but history too often only means a St. Bartholomew, a Fronde, a Joséphine, all the more astonishing things which have as little to do with the real living of the people as have the melodramas of the cinematograph. The Great War taught us what history really is. We saw with our eyes how living events were gradually transformed, shaped and chiselled out of their original semblance to fit in with the general scheme of things—the difference between a man himself and his memorial tablet. In the long chain of events, this monumentalism, this desiccation, has its uses, if we are not to be swamped with detail. But for the particular point upon which we concentrate, it is sadly insufficient. Thus we cling to the magic which now and again enables us to raise the dead—the magic of a word—"tocsin," for instance, infinitely more vivid than all the killings of the Bartholomew massacre; the magic of a picture—Puvion de Chavannes's charming Bishop as he discovers the little Geneviève, a real man in relation to a real and dear little girl. The Roman baths at the Cluny Museum give a more sudden jolt into the reality of the Roman occupation than histories of Roman Emperors, just because they are out of their classic setting, and "All Gaul is divided into three parts" ceases to be a Latin exercise and becomes a traveler's discovery. Sometimes indeed it is the present which is the classic and the past which really lives. All the dressmaking side of Paris, for instance, is at least as classic as the Conciergerie or the Place de la Grève. Did not French Queens, four hundred years ago, send Paris fashions to their less fortunate friends of England and Bavaria? Is not the Quartier Latin itself a classic formula of long hair and big black ties, which has been echoed all the world over? Are not the Bird Market and the Flower Market and the *midinette* at least as much the Paris stock-in-trade as the house of Madame de Sévigné, the Louvre, and all the places which we ought to see and for that very reason had much better neglect if we wish truly to realize Paris? It is not the date of a century that makes it classic; it is not its date that makes it vivid. Some of the incidents of the Great War are already more classic, are more bound up and set upon a shelf, than is, for instance, the survival in the name of Issy-les-Moulineaux of the earliest granaries of Paris. The Roman

tiles in the church of St. Julien-les-Pauvres have the modernness that belongs to something that is made, rather than hewn, while the fortifications, even the feudal institution of the concierge, at one bound carry you back into the Middle Ages. But all of it, classic and actual, the concentrated essence of two thousand years of living and dying and thinking and acting, is a tapestry of a million threads, a mosaic of a thousand shades, which in one way or another has something to offer everybody. And to this day each individual adds to it his quota, whether in the secular book-selling of the Latin Quarter, or in the singing of gay little old songs over the butter and eggs at the market; finds his reference point in it, the means by which he is enabled to share his thought with someone else. He may distinguish a red thread or a gold, he may look for blue glass or for white, but its tone is determined by the background to which it belongs.

Thus background fences us in from our loneliness; gives us a place in eternity from which we can start, to which we can come back. It is our spiritual home. It is the four walls which shut out nothingness with all its terrors, which out of everything constrains a choice. With the familiar stones of Paris under our feet, with ancient sites and ancient habits, our mind finds the fulcrum necessary for its movement. Perhaps we do not even know the actual events and personalities which are thick around us. But they are there, in every pore of the ancient city that has never grown old. As in a current, we find ourselves carried along by it without any effort on our own part. The back woodsman washes his shirt in the forest stream and the action drifts away, lost in space. The workman scrubs his blue shirt on the stone wall bordering the Seine, as thousands of his kind have done before him, and his action is one more bead on the connecting string of events. The familiar action counts, has meaning, continuity. Is it not true therefore that the greater part of creative work is actual background and background alone? Is not the effort of creation alone so huge that the means, the tools, must be at hand, for it not to exhaust itself halfway?

The would-be creator in new surroundings is at pains to supply himself with background, atmosphere. Why? Why is there a Greenwich Village? Why do people wear their hair long because

they follow particular vocations? Why must they have old furniture, or Japanese decorations, or Russian samovars—something, in short, which is more than chairs and tables? Why do people found art colonies, retire to the woods, speak of “atmosphere” as though you could transport it in your bag? And why does it all seem a little absurd, when in Paris, more perhaps than anywhere, it is just as much a part of natural life as meat and drink and clothing? It is because the creator in a newer country is faced with the gigantic task not only of creating the fragment which he shall add to the sum total of achievement, but of creating it, as it were, almost out of the void, of hewing a statuette out of a cliff instead of out of a block of marble already cut and proportioned. Who shall even see his statuette for the material which surrounds it? In Paris the clearing has long been made; the material is ordered, the marble cut; alone it remains to form the conception—work enough indeed for a single mind. The background is there, rich and compelling. The creator is never crushed under the weight of his material. There is more indeed than this. It is not the artist who makes the work of art alone. It is the public—who can understand and sympathize, who can receive what he has to give—who complete the work of art. Without it, the picture, the statue, does not exist any more than a wireless message exists till someone has heard it, or a literature until someone has been able to read it. Background, such as you find in Paris, implies this other half of art—perhaps indeed is the other half. It is appreciation at its highest, almost an invitation to the artist to get to work. The new Exchange Market in Paris is illustrative of this appreciation all ready to hand. In it impecunious painters show their pictures to grocers and butchers and bakers and exchange them for bread and meat and wine. And your grocer and your butcher and your baker will gladly give the meat and drink for the pictures that they want, that indeed they consider a need. Thus here is an immense throng, all ready made for appreciation; no aristocracy of amateurs, but a general public all more or less with a need. More and more this capacity for appreciation strikes one in Paris. In the Cluny Museum is a Madonna of a distinctly German type. “Rather Gretchen-like,” was the comment of a little French maid out for

a holiday, as naturally as though she were a professional art critic, noting down "influences". They know their history, too, in a real and vivid way. The little daughter of the concierge was asked which of his two wives Napoleon liked the better. To the general surprise she answered Marie Louise. And why? "Because she gave him a son," was the essentially French reply. The working-man will comment on Napoleon as though he had only just died. It is as real to him as is the long tradition of wars. The extraordinary stoicism of the French during the last war was the more remarkable when contrasted with the demeanors of other nations. There was something matter-of-fact about the Parisians under the attentions of Big Bertha, which made one feel how much it was in the blood. This also was part of their background. Their fathers had given them their stoicism. Thus the Paris background with all its myriad elements does carry the artist along in its strong current quite irresistibly, so that his own swimming really counts for all that it is worth, so that he has overcome the gravity of material instead of being impeded by the solid ground. This is one part played by background in the art of creation. There are others, some wholly advantageous, some hampering, deterring.

Where there is everything to choose, there is nothing to choose. The limitation of choice by background lends the mind profundity, since it becomes deep where it is prevented from being wide. Experiment here gives way largely to tradition, such as is instanced in the spaciousness of Paris. This spaciousness could be understood as applied to a show part of Paris, such as the Champs Elysées; but, held firmly in tradition by background, the Parisian hardly thinks whether his town shall be spacious or not. It is only a question of how spacious it shall be, and that even when he is dealing with quarters that in other cities are the step-children of the architect. His prisons, his asylums, his hospitals, have the same wide boulevards, beautifully tree-lined. The workmen's quarters themselves have none of the inutterable dinginess of London, the unkemptness of New York. In this wide spaciousness, whether materially in the buildings or spiritually in the attitude towards art, economy of means reaches perhaps its highest point. Spacing—it is already done by spacing,



by the sense which not only produces a beautiful building, but captures its surroundings as well. And curiously this applies even in the mediæval feature of the courtyards. Perhaps more than anyone, the Parisian has discovered that confinement is the one means of appreciating space.

The background of Paris is indeed the rich soil in which things grow nearly of themselves. Fertilized by a thousand thoughts and happenings, it not only promotes growth as a matter of course, but in its depth and richness allows of secret growth, of that conception in the darkness through which alone life comes. Sheltered, hidden from the vulgar gaze, the embryo thought can gather strength until it can support the light of day. It is not withered at the start by the too fierce glare of publicity. Perhaps indeed the greatest thoughts have never been uttered, unable to bear the rough birth into words. The stillness, the quiet, the comfort, even, of background is perhaps the sole means of containing man's instinct for action, for facts instead of knowledge, for knowledge instead of wisdom, enabling him to bear the stress and suffering which thought implies. And with the deeper capacity for suffering goes also the capacity for enjoyment. Big things are not necessary for the enjoyment of the Parisian. His cafés with their blue siphons and yellow brioches; his Sunday walks; a visit from a friend as he sits in his little shop on Sunday afternoons and sells you quarter-pounds of coffee; his bottle of wine, his Sunday dinner, the little bird that he has bought or the gold-fish in a bowl; his pleasure in a new suit or the new hat of Madame; his visit to the theatre or a concert; his pride in Paris itself, almost as though he had built it—all this has the immense spontaneity and naturalness, such as, curiously, is rarely seen except in extreme youth. It makes for that French gaiety and humor which are the birthright of the people which has enabled them to bear for centuries the amazing suffering of the European conflicts and never lose their joy in living, which seems all the lighter and gayer for the solid background against which it deploys itself.

And the reverse side of background—the side which, together with the noble city, provides the horrible little box-like houses of the suburbs, the Parisian's little beloved ideal of country life.

You have the terrible rustic arbors made of cement, the dark and dreary interiors of many a Paris house, the dreadful blue and yellow tiles which seem to belong to the period of the Tour Eiffel, the garish taste for artificial flowers and funeral pomp, the mausoleum of the salon. The Parisian's taste is as extremely bad as it is extremely good. His age-long thrift which sells oranges peeled in order to utilize the skins is cruelly extravagant of human life. Of modern aids, of light and cleanliness in the individual home, as opposed to general principles, he will have none. He has always done it; he will always do it. There is also his laborious bureaucracy, his passion for red-tape, the inverse quality of his love of little things. There are his beautiful manners, his exquisite turns of phrase, together with a talent for pushing and shoving which is over-developed. There is his tradition of the fine gesture, which sent his officers to battle in white kid gloves and which to-day makes an appeal to sentiment in a crowded tram effective, where mere common sense would fail.

Most of all there is his narrow nationalism. Here is his background, unsurpassed, wonderful. Here is his Paris, without doubt the most beautiful city on earth. Well, it is so. Why look any further? On the contrary, it is almost a disloyalty to look outside. Paris is self-sufficient, self-sufficing, the cynosure of every eye, the model for every other city. Even the Paris air—why of a truth it is not as other airs. But here again, these curious divergencies are something like the faults and irritating qualities of someone who is dead. We like to say of So-and-so. "He always *would* do this," and we say it affectionately, half humorously, just because at the time it annoyed us. We remember it more lovingly than the things which pleased, perhaps because it was more characteristic, more inexcusable. These are the impertinences of great things. Background indeed needs a certain amount of impertinence in all its solemn grandeur. There is a wonderful impertinence in blue and yellow tiles, within a stone's throw of the Sainte Chapelle; in the charming manners and turns of speech together with sudden fierce tempers of the moment. It illuminates the classic edifice of background into which the individual humanities have been built smoothly and impersonally; it makes possible the new thing. Background itself, as

a point of departure, makes the new thing possible, holds it down so that it may spring the more. It is like the formalism of French teaching, which holds in check till accumulated vigor bursts past it.

You cannot imitate the background of other people and retain the creative spirit, because by the imitation itself you are no longer single-minded. You cannot transplant a Latin Quarter, because by the very transplanting you are dealing rather with the physical than with the spiritual. As is its natural background—the composite, that is to say, of all its human, unconscious effort—so perhaps is the whole art of a nation; so also that fraction of a nation's being which one mind may contribute. We look at the depth and richness and inexhaustible suggestion of the Paris background; we are grateful for its stimulus, its inspiration. Only now and again do we realize that Roman and Frank and Gaul; Catholic and Huguenot; artist, priest and warrior; saint, martyr, philosopher, midinette, have really our energies in their grip and that, in the continuity of history, such creation as we can accomplish is their work, their inspiration—all but that infinitesimal fraction which is ourselves.

MURIEL HARRIS.